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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant problems that linguists face in their attempts to describe Vernacular Black English (VBE) is the matter of fluctuating forms. It is consistently observed that speakers appear to fluctuate between a socially stigmatized variant and its presumed nonstigmatized counterpart. Fluctuations in VBE have often been viewed as a type of code-switching. From this perspective, the fluctuating variants are assigned to different systems or subsystems within a speaker's linguistic repertoire, and he simply shifts from one to another in response to some stylistic, situational, or other functional shift. Variation has been observed, however, when the extralinguistic context remains constant, and such variation cannot be classified as code-switching. Much fluctuation in VBE, then, is best described as inherently variable rather than code-switching. This means that both of the fluctuating forms are an inherent part of a unitary system. In terms of descriptions of VBE, the code-switching concept leads to a distorted view of what the dialect is actually like, because VBE is seen to be more different from Standard English than it actually is. What is needed is a grammar which can account for variability beyond traditional rule optionality. (Author/PM)

A Note on Fluctuating Variants and the Status of Vernacular Black English

by

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One of the biggest problems that linguists have faced in their attempts to describe Vernacular Black English (VBE) is the matter of fluctuating forms. It is consistently observed that speakers appear to fluctuate between a socially stigmatized variant and its presumed non-stigmatized counterpart. In observing this fluctuation, one is faced with the temptation of calling the stigmatized variant the authentic VBE form and its non-stigmatized counterpart an importation from the superordinate Standard English (SE) variety. Thus, for example, it is tempting to call copula absence in a form like He nice or She over there the real VBE variant, and the presence of a copula in forms like He's nice or She's over there its SE counterpart. Similarly, it is tempting to call the pronunciation of test as tes' (i.e. application of the word-final consonant cluster rule) the VBE variant, and any pronunciation as test the SE one. Or, for example, to say that "pronominal apposition" or "left dislocation" in a sentence like My sister, she went to the store is the VBE correspondence for SE My sister went to the store, even though both utterances clearly are to be found in the speech of those considered to be VBE speakers.

Sometimes these fluctuations have been viewed as a type of code-switching. Theoretically, of course, it is possible to dismiss all alternate forms used by VBE speakers as code-switching between co-existent varieties. From this perspective, the fluctuating variants are assigned to different systems or subsystems within a speaker's linguistic repertoire and he is seen to shift from one subsystem to another. From this perspective, obligatory rules in Standard English which would have to be designated as optional in describing the speech behavior of VBE speakers are considered to be importations. Thus, forms such as He's nice, My sister went to the store, and test are treated as importations not to be

accounted for in a basilectal description of VBE. The end result of such a position is one in which VBE is certain to be maximally different from SE. In my opinion, classic examples of this perspective are found in the work of Loflin (1970), Fickett (1971), and to a lesser extent, Dillard (1972). I think that such a position on the current status of VBE is untenable on a theoretical level and may also have some rather unfortunate applicational implications as well.

First of all, we must note that switching typically takes place in response to some stylistic, situational, interlocutor, or other functional shift. In this context, I have no difficulty with the notion of code-switching by VBE speakers as it is associated with a SET of features. While certain examples of variation may be explained by the notion of code-switching, we are still faced with the observation that some variation takes place when the extralinguistic context remains quite constant and does not appear to be part of a SET of features typically associated with a code switch. Variation of particular items in a constant extra-linguistic context is difficult to dismiss as code-switching without reducing this notion beyond usefulness. Of course, one can always claim that our failure to uncover extra-linguistic concomitants of fluctuation is due to our finite powers of observation and that further socio-psychological investigation will reveal such clues. But we are still left with the fact that our best powers of observation leave us with inexplicable fluctuation. Although we can never argue that we have exhausted all possible socio-psychological reasons for explaining fluctuation logically, it DOES appear reasonable to assume that the existing data on fluctuation do not support a categorical explanation for many of the features observed among VBE speakers. And so we are left with the notion of what Labov (1969) has referred to as <u>inherent variability</u> (i.e. both of the fluctuating forms are an inherent part of a unitary system). Parenthetically, we might mention here that the notion of inherent variability from a synchronic viewpoint does not negate the idea that certain of these fluctuating features entered into the dialect as a type of dialect mixture in a decreolizing variety. (Following C. J. Bailey (1973), there seems to be some evidence that this is, in fact, how all variability actually starts.)

There is a further argument in defense of the position that much of the fluctuation in VBE is inherently variable rather than code-switching. This is found in the fact that variability shows such a systematic sensitivity to independent linguistic constraints. Most of the studies of observed variation in VBE demonstrate in very convincing terms the structured nature of variability in terms of its integration into the system. For example, a number of independent studies of consonant cluster reduction (Labov, et al (1968), Wolfram (1969), Shiels (1972), and Fasold (1972)) all indicate the regularity of certain linguistic effects which favor or disfavor the operation of the rule, not in terms of categorical but in terms of relative effect. It is hardly accidental that studies of consonant clusters indicate that the nature of the cluster (bimorphemic or monomorphemic), the following environment, the occurrence of stress, etc., have a systematic relative effect on the absence of the final member of the cluster. This sort of sensitivity to linguistic constraints is difficult to account for in an explanation of code-switching which is ultimately dependent on the association of a SET of features with extra-linguistic shifts of one type or another.

Now the above remarks should not be taken to mean that there are no differences between SE and VBE which are not categorical. We have found that our tabulations reveal a few types of phenomena which must be considered to be semi- or completely categorical for some VBE speakers. Thus, for example, both Labov, et al's (1968) and my own (Wolfram 1969) tabulations of multiple negation of the type He didn't do nothing indicate that there are some speakers which, in a given interview situation, will reveal multiple negation in all instances where a multiple negative might potentially be realized. The irony of these few categorical rules, however, is that they have something to say about a vast number of rules which appear to fluctuate. For example, while a speaker is categorically using multiple negation, he may be realizing copula absence, left dislocation, and consonant cluster reduction variably. If it were any other feature than multiple negation, we might be tempted to say that those features of which speakers are most conscious may reveal a type of code-switching between subsystems in a given interview situation. But the fact that multiple negation, perhaps

the most consciously recognized feature of all diagnostic variables in English, is categorical while lesser recognized variables are switched, really does not make a great deal of sense. Hence, the instances of the few categorical rules distinguishing VBE from SE ironically have something to say in support of the inherently variable nature of others.

Now for the implications. In terms of descriptions of VBE, a dismissal of unwanted variation ends up in a distorted view of what the dialect really is like. Although we may guarantee a maximally different system by dismissing variation, and one which admittedly may be closer to the historical source of VBE in some creole base, an account which describes VBE as it is currently spoken (at this point in time, if you will) will be unjustifiably distorted. And, in terms of the explanatory adequacy of linguistic theories, a grammar which can account for variability beyond traditional rule optionality would appear to be preferable to one that has to dismiss it. I think that versions of variation theory that include variable rules (Labov 1969, Fasold 1970, Wolfram 1973) can do that.

There are also applied implications of this position on variability, which can best be illustrated by an embarrassing confession. In our younger days, Fasold and I attempted some translation of certain reading passages into VBE for illustrative purposes (see Wolfram and Fasold, 1969). In one article, we had three passages. Two of the three we translated from an original passage in SE. For these passages we had categorical VBE correspondences for SE, guaranteeing maximal difference between our translations and the original SE version. Our third passage, however, was taken from an actual recording of an interesting narrative from some actual VBE speakers. Since we wanted to have this passage as verbatim as possible, we allowed for the observed variations. The embarrassing thing that resulted was the mismatch between our translations and the actual speakers. (There seemed to be little question that the speakers were real VBE speakers.) Unfortunately, we were guilty of distortion and have been placed appropriately on academic probation. But we learned our lesson. Just because people have historically distorted descriptions of VBE to make them look more like other varieties of White American English dialects does not justify a distortion to the other

extreme. VBE is not more different than it is actually spoken by VBE speakers. Sometimes the most obvious notions have a way of evading scholars.

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